Reconceptualising Equity: Pedagogy for Chinese Students in Australian Schools

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Abstract

Education Queensland's New Basics project has extended conceptions of 'equity' to incorporate dimensions such as higher order thinking and student control of classroom activity. This requires a critique of the outcomes attained by even high achieving students. It is therefore useful to interrogate professional discourses that shape pedagogies for particular groups of students. In this paper, discourses on 'the Chinese learner' are reviewed. The review raises new issues of equity because Chinese students are often high achievers in Australian schools, but are frequently criticised for learning in ways that seem to fit uneasily with the types of pedagogy now valorised in Queensland. The paper concludes with a note of caution about the definition of high quality academic outcomes in the new policy, and the effects of a gap between understandings of equity and professional discourses and practice.

Introduction

The New Basics educational renewal project has put 'pedagogy' on the reform agenda in Queensland state schools. Pedagogy has been identified as an instrument of the New Basics vision of an equitable social future; and so have teachers, as experts in pedagogy. No one pedagogic approach is advocated. Rather, teachers are urged to mentor one another as pedagogues; to open up their classrooms to their colleagues; to swap strategies; in short, to talk about pedagogy that works with students who are 'at risk' of low academic outcomes (Luke 1999). After a morale-sapping decade of being reformed – from above, and by others – many teachers are responding enthusiastically to a project that not only focuses on 'what is really important', but also respects their professional expertise. In this context it is timely to examine professional discourses that shape pedagogies for particular groups of students. My aim in this paper is to make a small contribution in this regard by analysing discourses

on 'the Chinese learner' in relation to the reconceptualised understandings of equity evident in the New Basics concept of 'productive pedagogies'.

Specifically, I present a review of research that has empirically tested claims that Chinese students are more achievement-oriented, studious, passive and inclined to rote learning than western peers. This may seem a curious object for a discussion of equity policy, as Chinese students often achieve outstanding results in Australian schools. Indeed, teachers tend to be concerned not with the students' results per se, but with the manner in which they are achieved (Cahill, Birchall, Fry, Vine, Black-Gutman and McLaughlin 1996, Mak and Chan 1995). However, the notions of equity underpinning the productive pedagogies framework require teachers to look beyond simple 'results' to the quality of intellectual and social outcomes, and the degree of control students have over their academic activities (Department of Education, Queensland (hereafter DEQ) 2001). In these terms, passivity and rote learning represent low quality academic outcomes. Consequently, the manner in which Chinese students achieve outstanding results is now an equity consideration. It is therefore necessary to think anew about pedagogies created for even high achieving students and, further, the professional discourses shaping these.

The paper has three sections. In the first, I describe changing understandings of equity in some Queensland contexts. In the second section of the paper, I review empirical research examining the claims of professional discourses on 'the Chinese learner'. I conclude by offering a note of caution about the definition of high quality academic outcomes, and the effects of a gap between understandings of equity and professional discourses and practice. While the focus is on equity in Queensland state schools, the discussion should be of broader interest at a time when student populations are becoming increasingly diverse as a result of increased flows of people across national borders, and new sectors of the labour market are demanding high-level thinking and conceptual competencies of students who have not historically achieved such outcomes, including linguistic and ethnic minority students (e.g. Coelho 1994, Holt 1993, Shulman, Lotan and Whitcomb 1998).

Reconceptualising 'equity'

Systemic social justice policies were formulated for Queensland state schools by the Goss Labor government elected in 1989. After 32 years of traditional conservative administration, this development represented a dramatic shift in social policy. Despite an entrenched 'anti-equity' culture (Lingard and Garrick 1997, p. 159), equity projects had been undertaken in Queensland state schools previously, but in an ad hoc way, at the local level, and with federal funds. With the change of government, however, an Equity Directorate was created in the state department of education, making projects for students of racial, linguistic and other target groups a systemic priority.

Equity Directorate initiatives included the Cultural and Language Diversity in Education (CALDE) policy (DEQ 1995) and an anti-racist policy (DEQ 1996). The CALDE policy mandated socially just curriculum, anti-racist and culturally inclusive professional development programs, and participation of diverse groups of parents in schools. The anti-racist policy required racism to be rejected, and cultural and linguistic diversity to be valued, affirmed and responded to through curriculum, pedagogy and school organisation. During the implementation of these policies, there was a gradual extension of concern from culturally appropriate content to literacy and numeracy outcomes more generally (Dooley, Exley and Singh 2000). This broadening of focus foreshadowed some current emphases.

Equity is a fundamental premise of the New Basics educational renewal project that is currently being undertaken by Education Queensland. The project explicitly addresses the aspirations of at-risk and culturally diverse communities through a definition of equity as 'equal access to, and continuous improvement of, achievement at important common learnings' (DEQ 2000, p. 6). Pedagogic renewal and innovation have been identified as instruments of this vision.

Specifically, the New Basics project assumes that no single pedagogy works for all aspects of the curriculum, and – given differences in backgrounds, styles and capabilities – for all students. Hence, teachers are being encouraged to make principled pedagogic decisions for particular groups of students. Although no one pedagogy is advocated, four categories of pedagogy have been identified as productive of high quality academic outcomes: (i) intellectual quality, (ii) connectedness, (iii) supportive classroom environment and (iv) recognition of difference (DEQ 2001).

Intellectual quality refers to the extent to which higher order thinking involving deep understanding of the central ideas of fields is promoted. Sustained and critical conversation that attends to the construction of texts and knowledge is key. This dimension is a new one: intellectual quality was not an overt concern of earlier understandings of equity. *Connectedness* refers to engagement with problems that relate to the world beyond the classroom and are linked to students' prior knowledge. This dimension of productive pedagogies picks up earlier concerns with cultural inclusion. *Social support* refers to opportunities for students to have a significant degree of control in their classroom activities, while seriously engaged in study directed towards explicit, high-level criteria. Like intellectual quality, this dimension represents a broadening of conceptions of equity: student control and explicit evaluative criteria were not overt concerns of earlier policy. *Recognition of difference* refers to students' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, diverse others in positive human relationships and communities. This dimension reflects earlier concerns with cultural inclusion and racism (DEQ 2001).

Given the backgrounds, styles and capabilities attributed to Chinese students in professional discourse on 'the Chinese learner', the categories of intellectual quality and supportive classroom environment are of particular interest in this paper. In teachers' professional discourse Chinese students are commonly described as being more studious and achievement-oriented than western students and less disposed to whole class discussion and active engagement with curricular content (e.g. Kember and Gow 1991). These perceptions are evident in Australian school settings. For example, one study found that, although Australian teachers admired Chinese students for the outstanding academic results that won esteem for their schools, they were critical of the students' achievement orientation and studiousness (Cahill et al. 1996).

Professional discourses not only identify Chinese students as different from mainstream Australian students, but also provide an explanation of the differences. A booklet written by two teachers in a Queensland educational region with a large population of language background other than English (LBOTE) students is illustrative. The explicit aim of the booklet was to help colleagues implement Queensland's cultural equity policies (i.e. the CALDE policy). To this end, differences between LBOTE and mainstream learners were described and explained:

> LBOTE students have often been exposed to vastly different methodologies than those practised in Australia at present. For example, Taiwanese, Korean and Japanese students come from very competitive education systems which involve large classes, lecture-style teaching and rote-learning. … Teacher-centredness characterises the majority of non-Western LBOTE students' experiences. This leads to a reliance on imitating and rote-learning by many students who have often not been taught to think in an independent, critical and abstract manner. They also experience problems with what they perceive as a more 'informal' learning environment. (Jurgensen and Roebuck 1995, p. 5)

In this example of teacher professional discourse, Chinese students' learning behaviours are explained in terms of educational background: socialisation into 'non-western' school systems produces traits inimical to 'Australian' pedagogies. The professional development program at Daybreak State High School (Daybreak SHS),[1] a linguistically and culturally diverse secondary school in the same educational region, provides a similar example of professional discourse on the difference of Chinese students. For more than thirty years, Daybreak SHS was primarily Anglo-Australian, but an influx of professional and business migrants into the local area resulted in the enrolment of more than two hundred Chinese students in less than two years. In response, and under the influence of Queensland's equity policy,

Daybreak SHS engaged a teacher aide from Hong Kong to provide teachers with information about schooling in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC (Dooley 2001). Like the LBOTE booklet, the professional development program at Daybreak SHS was thus shaped by professional discourses on both the differences between Chinese and mainstream Australian students, and the educational backgrounds that had produced these. The appeal of these discourses to Australian teachers can be understood in relation to common understandings of 'multiculturalism'.

As was noted earlier, Queensland's cultural equity policies require teachers to value, affirm and respond to cultural diversity through pedagogy. Although these policies do not overtly enshrine a particular theoretical perspective, they were amenable to certain common understandings of multiculturalism. At the time the LBOTE booklet and the Daybreak SHS professional development programs were created, Australia was described in official pro-Asian rhetoric as being 'on the road from a racist, exclusionary past to a multicultural, inclusionary present' (Ang 1996, p. 37). The discourse of multiculturalism that had a high profile in Australian policy contexts for more than a decade fostered tolerance, and indeed celebration, of 'diversity'. This discourse created a binary opposition between an (Anglo) self who was to be inclusive, and an (ethnic) other who was to be included (Ang 1996). In this discursive context it is not surprising that teachers held accountable for valuing, affirming and responding to cultural diversity through pedagogy invoked professional discourses describing and explaining differences between 'the Chinese learner' and mainstream students.

In valorising high quality academic outcomes and common learnings, the productive pedagogies framework has moved beyond conceptions of equity as simple 'tolerance' and 'celebration' of diversity. However, since teachers are being encouraged to acknowledge the backgrounds of distinctive groups of students, it is reasonable to assume that discourses on 'the Chinese learner' will continue to be influential, especially when they describe and explain traits relevant to the productive pedagogies framework.

It is possible, for example, that imperatives for intellectual quality and social support might prompt pedagogies designed to change traits acquired by Chinese students prior to their entry into the Australian education system. Passive learner dispositions are the antithesis of student control of classroom activities, an aspect of socially supportive pedagogy. Furthermore, passivity does not seem amenable to the sustained and critical conversation with peers and teacher that is key to intellectual quality in the productive pedagogies framework. Given this possibility, interrogation of professional discourses on 'the Chinese learner' is of some urgency.

Empirical studies of professional discourses on 'the Chinese learner'

Many of the studies reviewed here were conducted from a 'student approaches to learning' (SAL) perspective. Key to SAL theory is a distinction between 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning, where 'surface' denotes memorisation for examinations; and 'deep' denotes attention to meaning for the sake of understanding. Qualitative SAL studies have used sharply focused interviews to probe Chinese students' conceptions of learning in relation to particular tasks and environments, while quantitative studies have used learning inventories that probe how Chinese students usually go about learning tasks, or would prefer to go about them (Watkins 1996b). Four stereotypes have been investigated, namely that 'the Chinese learner' is more achievement-oriented and studious than western peers, less active in class participation and more inclined to rote learning.

1. Achievement orientation

SAL research in tertiary and secondary settings affirms that Chinese learners are more achievement-oriented than western students. For example, Hong Kong students out-scored Australian students on achievement orientation in a learning inventory study that compared the intentions and perceptions of over 2000 Hong Kong accountancy, applied social studies, diagnostic sciences, language and communication, rehabilitation sciences, and textiles and clothing students with Australian arts, science and education students. These findings were consistent with those of learning inventory studies of Hong Kong and Australian secondary school students (Kember and Gow 1991).

There is SAL evidence that Chinese students' achievement motivation diminishes in Australian tertiary contexts (Volet, Renshaw and Tietzel 1994). Similar findings were produced by a study conducted (from other than a SAL perspective) in Australian secondary schools (Mak and Chan 1995). Nonetheless, Volet and others found that Chinese tertiary students in Australia maintain levels of achievement orientation that are higher than those of not only local students, but also Chinese students in Hong Kong. The higher achievement scores of Chinese students in general were explained in terms of cultural belief in education as the pathway to satisfying employment (see also Salili 1996, Lee 1996). The higher scores of Chinese international students were explained in terms of pressure to justify the investment in their education.

In examining claims that achievement orientation precludes deep learning, Volet et al. (1994) found that local tertiary students, like their Chinese international student peers, preferred 'surface' and 'achieving' motives for learning. This preference was attributed to the competitive, examination-oriented secondary schooling recently completed by

all the students. In other words, it has been suggested that there is considerable similarity in the learning motives of both Australian and Chinese secondary school students.

2. Studiousness

SAL research has been mainly concerned to explain, rather than to test, the claims of an extensive literature suggesting that Chinese students are taught from an early age to work hard. For example, Salili (1996) found overwhelming evidence that culture mediates explanations of achievement. Specifically, where westerners attribute achievement to ability, Chinese attribute it to effort, and see virtue in attempting tasks beyond one's ability and modifying ability through effort. However, this attribution diminishes after migration to the US. Lee (1996) argued that Confucianism underpins the attribution of success to effort, and Biggs (1996) suggested that Chinese children are inculcated into this attribution through culturally specific child-rearing practices. Contrary to this latter claim, American researchers working outside the SAL perspective have pointed to a paucity of rigorous studies showing causal links between parenting styles and Asian-American children's high academic achievements (Sue and Okazaki 1995).

3. Classroom participation

As the LBOTE booklet discussed earlier illustrates, it is sometimes claimed that Chinese students are less active than local students in classroom discussion as a result of their previous school experience. Biggs' (1996) review of research on Chinese learners presents counter evidence. He cited studies indicating that teachers in the PRC, Taiwan and Japan engage in tutorial-style strategies; posing provocative questions, allowing reflection time, exploring alternative answers to problems, and individualising techniques to suit students. Indeed, it was this type of background experience that was cited by Volet et al. (1994) in partial explanation of the finding that local and Singaporean Chinese students were alike in both the quantity and type of their tutorial contributions in their first undergraduate year in an Australian university (see also Volet and Renshaw 1995, 1996).

Similarly, research conducted from perspectives other than that of SAL theory has provided evidence of a Taiwanese trend to train children in the 'western' way so that they become more active, self-reliant, intellectually critical and competent. Indeed, this trend, along with assimilation to Australian community values, has been invoked to explain the failure of some Taiwanese students in Australian secondary schools (Mak and Chan 1995). In contrast, traditional patterns of teacher-directed classroom interaction involving constant review, memorisation drills and testing have been found in 'good' or 'academic track' Taiwanese secondary school classrooms (Shaw 1991, 1996), and in PRC classrooms (Cortazzi and Jin 1997).

4. Rote learning

Rote learning is perhaps the most ubiquitous stereotype of 'the Chinese learner'. Salili (1996) examined this stereotype by reviewing more than forty studies of the learning strategies of Chinese students. The conclusion was that Chinese students value competence and mastery of new tasks for their own sake, an inclination incompatible with rote learning. However, this inclination lessens in the most competitive years of secondary schooling when rote learning and achievement orientation are seen as effective strategies for coping with demanding courses. A similar explanation was offered in Volet et al.'s (1994) study of South-East Asian students in an Australian university. Specifically, it was suggested that familiar surface learning strategies from the students' recent secondary schooling were one way of coping with the demands of shifting to a new educational environment, an environment where only surface knowledge was to be assessed anyway.

The heavy content load of the school curriculum, in addition to the linguistic demands of English-medium instruction, and cultural respect for authority, were cited to explain the extensive memorisation found by another SAL study (Watkins 1996a). This study of public secondary school students in Hong Kong found that over time students progressively tried to: (i) memorise everything; (ii) memorise only the most important content; and finally (iii) understand content in order to enhance memorisation. It should be noted that while performance was always the end, and memorisation always the means, memorisation was not necessarily rote, but was sometimes combined with understanding.

5. Western classroom contexts

The preceding review indicates that some Chinese secondary school students may approach learning differently from their Australian peers. Successful Chinese students are more achievement-oriented, and may rely more on memorisation, although this does not necessarily indicate lesser concern with meaning and understanding. Evidence that Chinese students are less able to participate in class discussion was inconclusive. These findings suggest that professional discourses on 'the Chinese learner' may thus point to real differences: Chinese students may constitute a distinctive group for whom special consideration must be made if pedagogies are to be productive of high quality academic outcomes including intellectual quality and student control of learning. Accordingly, it is essential to examine the explanations offered for Chinese students' learning behaviours.

One explanation of 'the Chinese learner' is cultural, invoking Confucian precepts. The other SAL explanation points to institutional factors including: (i) recall-type assessment tasks; (ii) the heavy content load of schooling; (iii) instruction in the foreign language medium of English; and (iv) teachers' stereotypical expectations of

Chinese students. These factors are not specific to Chinese contexts. Surface-level assessment tasks are, for example, a factor invoked by Volet et al. (1994) to explain the approaches to learning of Chinese first year students in an Australian university. The operation of similar factors at the secondary school level would represent a fundamental challenge to the assumption that Chinese students' approaches to learning reflect their *background* in other schooling systems. In light of the productive pedagogies imperative to account for the backgrounds, styles and capabilities of students, this possibility warrants consideration.

The effects of western environments on Chinese students' learning behaviours have been addressed in the literature on English as a foreign language. A 3½ year ethnographic study of four newly arrived Chinese students in mainstream classes in a culturally diverse US secondary school (Harklau 1994) is instructive. Teacher-led discussion was the most common interactive routine in the study classrooms. Because this discussion took the form of the three-part IRE exchange typical of classroom talk (teacher initiate – student response – teacher evaluate), student output was limited to a single word or phrase. Students did not need to create coherence over sustained interactive turns, negotiate turns, construct meanings jointly, maintain topics and monitor and repair comprehension. Crucially, when opportunities for output did arise, these were generally distributed to native English speakers rather than Chinese students. In the case of written language, Chinese students, unlike native English speakers in high track classes, were expected, at most, to undertake activities that required single word or phrase responses in fill-in-the-blank and short answer formats.

An interesting finding from Harklau's (1994) study is that the oral and written output required of native English speakers was not required of Chinese students. Similar findings were produced by my own study of pedagogy for Chinese students at Daybreak SHS, the culturally diverse Australian secondary school introduced earlier in this paper.[2] Two Year 10 geography classes participated in the study. The teachers of these classes were nominated as exemplary exponents of a cultural equity program created in response to the arrival of 200 Chinese students (mostly Taiwanese), and informed by Queensland's cultural equity policies. One class was relatively heterogeneous, with a mix of 19 native English-speaking students and 12 migrants from non-English-speaking countries, four of whom were Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong. In contrast, the other class had 12 recently arrived Chinese students (from Taiwan and the PRC, including Hong Kong), 6 other English as a second language students, and 6 native English-speaking students. The Chinese students had generally undertaken intensive English courses at language schools and in the Daybreak SHS language unit before entry into mainstream classes.

Data for the study included four audio-taped and transcribed geography lessons taught to each class. Detailed qualitative analyses of teacher–student interactions in the lessons were conducted within a framework that integrated concepts from classroom talk research (e.g. Shuy 1988) into Bernstein's (1996) sociology of pedagogy. The focus was on the relative control, exercised by teacher and students, of the selection, sequencing and pacing of content in lessons, and the formulation of criteria for evaluating students' acquisition of content. Control was examined at various levels of delicacy: (i) activities (e.g. teacher-directed dialogue, student-initiated dialogue); (ii) optional moves within activities (e.g. teacher re-statement of a question that had gone unanswered); and (iii) acts (e.g. different types of questions including open-ended 'wh' questions and closed tag questions eliciting agreement).

Interactive routines in the study classrooms were similar to those observed by Harklau (1994): teacher-directed dialogue was predominant, as was seatwork (individual written work preceded by a whole class oral introduction). As in Harklau's study, few opportunities for oral output were distributed to Chinese students during dialogue. There was only one instance in the eight lessons where a Chinese student volunteered an answer to a question asked of the class. Moreover, overt efforts to promote the participation of Chinese students in dialogue were rare and limited. For example, Chinese students were nominated to answer questions during teacher-directed whole class reviews of definitions that were to appear on the unit test (both classes), but not actually compelled to speak. From the data, it was possible to identify assumptions made by the teachers about the Chinese students' capacity to participate in whole class dialogue. Frequent checks of student understanding (a strategy recommended as part of the school's cultural equity program) made it clear that the teachers viewed the pace of classroom talk as an impediment to Chinese students' participation in dialogue. The following extract is illustrative. The extract is drawn from an exchange between a Year 10 geography teacher and two Taiwanese girls (names italicised). The exchange occurred after a whole class teacher-directed dialogue activity during which the teacher had gone over the answers to a worksheet the students had just completed.

Extract 1

1	Ms Watson:	Girls, are you right? Want to look at the list [from which the answers had been read] again? Hmmm? *Nancy?*
2	*Nancy*:	Huh?
3	Ms Watson:	Are you right? What are you doing? *Jenny*, did you get them all?
4	*Jenny*:	No.
5	Ms Watson:	Do you want to check them? You can get them from me in a minute.

Seatwork was nearly always adapted for Chinese students. This activity has two phases: a dialogic phase during which the teacher prepares the class for a written task; and a phase of independent work during which the task is usually undertaken individually. The teachers variously encouraged the Chinese students to copy peers' work (even though other students were overtly directed to 'do your own work') and provided particularised repeats of preparatory dialogue. An example of the latter occurred during a lesson in which students were required to write a paragraph explaining the sequence of events indicated in a series of diagrams depicting the development and management of coastal erosion. After explaining the requirement, the teacher offered help to two Taiwanese students (names italicised). The teacher repeated the gist of the whole class dialogue to these students, and then dictated an appropriate paragraph.

Extract 2

1 Ms Macara: So all of this [series of diagrams on the worksheet] is about problems as a result from building on sand dunes. Just think, this is a whole pattern of what's happened in there. Can you just tell me in one sentence basically what that's all about? This is about problems; it's about problems. Do you understand what has caused the problems? It's about problems that come from building on sand dunes. So, how about we start off like this and say, 'Building on sand dunes at the beach can make problems'. Just start it that way. How about you write that down? Have you a piece of paper? *Hugh*, are you doing the same thing? [to *Hugh* and *John*] So you can write, are you ready? 'Building on sand dunes, sand dunes, sand, S-A-N-D [spelling out loud] dunes, can lead to problems'. Understand what I mean by 'lead to'? Things that can create or make problems, lead to problems. Full stop. All right. …

Extract 2 shows how the two Taiwanese students received a more teacher-controlled version of the paragraph-writing activity than the class as a whole. (Similarly controlled versions were made available to other Chinese students in the class.) Specifically, the teacher not only initiated questions, but also answered them. This is consistent with the findings of classroom talk research that has shown how teachers generally consider it good practice to strengthen control of dialogue so that even the most reluctant of speakers can participate (Shuy 1988). In this case, 'participation' was reduced to hearing and understanding. In a further display of strong control, the teacher dictated her answers to the Taiwanese students to write down as their paragraph. This is consistent with Harklau's (1994) finding that Chinese students were only expected to complete the most controlled of written activities in mainstream classes. The data makes it clear that a lack of understanding was assumed to be an

impediment to the Taiwanese students' seatwork: *'Do you understand what has caused the problems?'* Both teachers repeatedly checked that Chinese students understood the meaning of what had been said. The assumption seemed to be that English language proficiency was the source of the problem; students were, for example, referred to their bilingual dictionaries during some checking interactions.

The general finding of the study was that Chinese students did not participate actively in dialogic activities, and received more teacher-directed versions of seatwork activities. Moreover, English language proficiency was identified repeatedly as an impediment to active participation in dialogue and independence in seatwork (that relied on a dialogic preparatory phase). I suggest that the repeated choice of whole class dialogue to develop content and prepare students for seatwork in the study classrooms made it likely that the Chinese students, with their limited English capacity, would be both passive and teacher-reliant.

According to Bernsteinian theory (1996), it is through relations of control that students are socialised into particular identities. When control is strong, attributes such as conscientiousness, studiousness, receptiveness and attentiveness are made available to students. In short, it is likely that students will be socialised into passive, teacher-reliant learner identities. When control is weak, 'creativity', 'individuality' and other attributes of active, independent learner identities are made available. In other words, so-called 'Chinese' learner characteristics can be created through strong relations of control in an Australian school classroom. This conclusion is consistent with the SAL claim that western teachers' negative perceptions of Chinese learners reflect their lack of consciousness about the expectations of memorisation, passivity, and examination cue seeking that are inherent in their teaching (Biggs and Watkins 1996).

Conclusions

The reconceptualisation of equity in systemic policy raises new challenges for Queensland teachers. With passivity and rote learning now counted as inequitable academic outcomes, it is necessary to look beyond results to the quality of student learning. Chinese students make an interesting study in this regard because they often achieve at a high level in Australian schools, but in an apparently passive and rote manner. To begin exploring new equity issues that arise in relation to students like these, professional discourses were examined through a review of empirical studies addressing claims about the achievement orientation, studiousness, passivity and rote learning preferences of 'the Chinese learner'. The conclusion was that these attributes might sometimes be created in the interactive conditions of classrooms in Australia, as well as Chinese countries. In some cases, limited English proficiency may make it difficult for Chinese students to participate actively and independently in whole class

dialogue in mainstream Australian classes. This may result in more teacher-controlled versions of pedagogy being made available for these students, and hence the possibility of socialisation into more passive and teacher-reliant learner identities.

The review presented in this paper gives cause for consideration on two counts: (i) assumptions about 'intellectual quality' evident in current understandings of equity; and (ii) a gap between equity policy and professional knowledge and practice. In both cases, new equity issues arise. To conclude this paper, these issues are now examined in turn.

Firstly, as was noted earlier, 'intellectual quality' is now counted as a dimension of equity in Queensland policy. In general terms, this dimension is concerned with students' capacity to manipulate and transform information and ideas, and to communicate these in detail. 'Substantive conversation' has been identified as a key to this outcome. Such conversation builds on participants' ideas in a particular discipline through higher order thinking that enhances collective understanding. It is conversation that is sustained beyond the ubiquitous IRE exchange and, further, is not strongly controlled by the teacher (DEQ 2001). A critical question arises: who is advantaged, and who disadvantaged, by the link that has been made between this form of conversation and intellectual quality?

Inability to participate in sustained and student-controlled conversation is one of the new categories of failure created by the reconceptualisation of equity in Queensland. The research reviewed in this paper suggests that some students, by dint of prior educational experience, or limited English proficiency in Australian educational contexts, are more likely than others to achieve such failure. The redefinition of what counts as success and failure thus has considerable significance for a group of students that has hitherto been notable for achieving outstanding results.

I am not arguing here against the incorporation of substantive conversation into notions of intellectual quality. Rather, I am pointing to the difficulties of the task now confronting teachers. From the preceding review of research, it will be recalled that teachers strengthen their control of classroom interaction to include students who would otherwise be unable to participate. If this occurs during the teacher-directed pedagogy described in the literature, how much more likely is it during 'substantive conversation' with its much greater demands on students' oral English proficiency? The onus is thus on teachers to create conditions within which all students can participate in substantive conversation.

The second set of implications relates to the gap between equity policy and professional knowledge and practice relating to Chinese students. Specifically, I

suggest that educators need to be wary about working from what have been described in the anthropological literature (Moore 1993) as 'break of day scenarios', in this case, the moment of first contact between Australian teacher and Chinese student. The Chinese student held up for scrutiny in professional discourse is often untouched by the Australian education system, in Chow's (1993) words, an authentic 'native'. As a corollary, the Australian teacher is assumed to be in need of instruction about the students' 'native' pedagogic culture, the background that has supposedly socialised them as passive and teacher-reliant learners. When these traits are not valorised, as is now the case in Queensland, such instruction is likely to shape pedagogies dedicated to changing student attributes. But what if it is experience in Australian classrooms that is at least partially responsible for socialising students into these attributes? What might be the result of misguided efforts to change students when it is pedagogy that needs changing? Furthermore, what risk is there of blaming students for becoming the learners that pedagogy in Australian classrooms has made it possible for them to be?

The requirement for Queensland teachers to account for the backgrounds, styles and capabilities of distinctive groups of students represents a welcome development in equity policy. This requirement is consistent with the cultural difference hypothesis that explains the systematic production of differential achievement in terms of matches (and mismatches) between the learner identities brought to school by students and those required by the school. Versions of this hypothesis, framed in terms of the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, have attained wide circulation in professional and research forums (Ladwig 2000). The cultural difference hypothesis is an important alternative to deficit explanations that individualise failure in students (often living in poverty and other circumstances of disadvantage) and their teachers. For example, the hypothesis is being employed extensively by educational researchers who are re-envisaging social justice agendas in Australian schooling after two decades of neoliberal economic and socially conservative reform that has widened social divides by advantaging some and disadvantaging others, in many cases through the increase in poverty (see the articles collected in volume 27, number 3 of this journal).

However, when working with the cultural difference hypothesis, it is crucial for teachers to critique the professional discourses that shape their interpretations of learner attributes, and hence the decisions they make about pedagogies for distinctive groups of students. Inappropriate interpretations run the risk of producing new deficit explanations to account for the failure of some students to achieve high quality academic outcomes from supposedly productive pedagogies. It is therefore essential to be aware of the ideological work enacted by professional discourses in the gap between policy and teacher knowledge and practice. After a decade of attacks on the

teaching profession, the respect accorded teacher expertise by the New Basics project is to be applauded. However, with this respect comes an obligation to subject time-worn professional wisdom about one or another group of students to rigorous critique.

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Notes

[1] This name is a pseudonym, as are the names of all people mentioned in this paper.

[2] The data analysed in this study were produced as part of the Large ARC-funded project, Constructing Australian Identities through Language and Literacy in Schools, Communities and Workplaces (1996–99, Chief Investigators: Parlo Singh, James Garton and Peter Freebody).

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